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What Are the Great Children's Stories and Why

By FREDERIC TABER COOPER.

ANATOLE FRANCE once confided to the world at large that the really best book he ever read had been absorbed surreptitiously in school hours, between the covers of a textbook—but that he discreetly refrained from reading that book again in later years. We have all been guilty of similar misplaced enthusiasms, have thrilled to the pinnacle of youthful fervor over the mock heroics of some pinchbeck hero, the tribulations of some tinsel heroine, and cherished the illusion that here was really the best book ever written, until years later, less wise than Anatole France, we made the mistake of trying to reread it. The first and best criterion of the really great books of youth is that they must stand the test of being reread with the eyes of mature experience, and while still affording something of the old time thrill to that side of each and every one of us that remains incurably young, they must also have an ultimate something to give, in the way of artistry or latent meaning, which eluded the grasp of childhood.

Probably most of us have received a shock of enlightenment when we have tried to meet the needs of the younger generation by passing on to it certain favorite books of our own day. One veteran dealer in children's books confesses to the annual experience, along in December, of having a number of middle aged customers enthusiastically demanding certain six-volume sets of juvenile fiction by authors whose names were housenold words in the early seventies; and along in January these same middle aged men are pretty sure to come back, sheepishly asking if they can exchange those books for something else: "I guess I made a mistake; the boys won't read them." Slowly but surely the law of survival of the fittest works in book land as inexorably as elsewhere. Those of us who follow the pleasant practice of reading aloud to children get our disillusions with more poignant directness. We have unearthed, perhaps, the very book that we ourselves clamored to have read over and over again in our own childhood; we may even, in a glow of self-elation, have boasted of the wonders that it holds in store. And suddenly, even before our critical young audience has had time to show its boredom, we have begun to feel rather foolish at hearing our own voices utter such paltry stuff. One unmistakable hallmark of a true childhood classic is that it can be read by children and grownups together without sounding silly to either.

The mere fact that we remember a book through a score of years is no test at all. It is the kind of memory, the definiteness of detail that counts. Perhaps your own boyhood days go back to that pre-Henty period when Horatio Alger and Oliver Optic and Harry Castlemon were at their zenith. "Ben the Baggage Smasher," "The Starry Flag," "The Sportsman's Club in the Saddle" were books that held you breathless until the last page was turned. But beyond the title, do you remember anything of them to-day? Isn't it all just a pleasant impression and a blur? Elijah Kellogg, less popular in his day, was made of sturdier stuff. His "Elm Island Series" left imprints on the memory that refuse to fade. There was a Gargantuan quality about his hero, Lion Ben. One remembers especially one prodigious fight of his, single handed, against six burly pirates, armed to the teeth, who had invaded his island home; and when the fight was over the pirates who were not corpses envied those who were, and the pirate chief himself was wedged mightily in the chimneyplace where Lion Ben had flung him down the full length of the room. Mayne Reid is another author of those faroff times who comes very near to deserving a place in the best book class. At his worst he turned out reams of wild melodrama, of Spanish intrigue and Mexican heiresses and Indian scalp hunters, the very titles of which have faded out. But betweentimes he wrote just a few tales of adventure and exploration that were worthwhile and among them one unique volume, "The Plant Hunters." It told of two young botanists, with their Hindoo guide, who were caught in a circular valley in the Himalaya Mountains by a convulsion of nature which opened a hundred foot crevasse, barring the only egress. With months of toil they bridge that crevasse, only to find further on a wider and more hopeless gap. With infinite toil they construct ladders to scale the cliffs, only to find when almost at the top that the upper ledges hopelessly overhang, making ladders futile. Few books were ever contrived where the suspense element was so ingeniously prolonged and the thrill when it came so satisfactory.

II.

But the books which unquestionably belong to the best book class are the ones that we don't forget. No one forgets "Tom Sawyer" or "Huckleberry Finn," because to begin with one doesn't forget anything that Mark Twain ever wrote, and of all his books these two incomparable stories of American boy life are destined to be longest remembered. "Treasure Island" is another story that leaves pictures as clearly etched upon the memory as a signed artist's proof. It is always a treat to hear two Stevenson "fans" eagerly reminiscing over "Treasure Island," matching their impressions, recalling the high spots, vying with each other in minuteness of detail, living over again the fervid hours of the first reading. Or again, take "Robinson Crusoe," the pioneer adventure story in English. It has lost something of its former popularity, but it has in it one thrill unsurpassed in the whole range of British fiction, where Crusoe, in the midst of the utter loneliness of his island, comes suddenly upon the naked footprint in the sand.

There has so long been a little halo around the "Swiss Family Robinson" that one feels constrained to treat it with some indulgence. Its zoology and botany are topsy-turvy, its adventures are as exaggerated as a comic supplement, and it suffers throughout from an overdose of early piety. It is not one of the great books; yet there doubtless are almost as many children who have played Swiss Family Robinson in the top of an apple tree as have impersonated Crusoe and his man Friday in a tent improvised from old sheets. Turning to books for girls, there can hardly be any question as to the right of "Little Women" to the place of honor. Indeed, it was no more than was to be expected when the American Library Association and National Educational Association recently placed it first on their joint list of twenty-five "Books for the Country School." It is the enduring classic of sane and wholesome American home life, and to have missed the acquaintance of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy at just the right age is one of the minor tragedies of life. How Meg went to Vanity Fair, how Beth found the Palace Beautiful, how Amy went through the Valley of Humiliation and how Jo met Apollyon on the one tragic time when her quick temper mastered her are chapters that lose nothing of their potency when we read them years later, but the rare spirit of youth in them craves as its right a young audience.

"Little Women's" great rival of former days, the "Wide, Wide World," seems latterly to have dropped out of sight. It had a prim, old fashioned outlook, and an uncompromising way of dividing the sheep from the goats. Those who were bad were quite unregenerate while those who were good had a disconcerting way of suddenly dropping on their knees in prayer even on the public highways. Nevertheless little Ellen Montgomery, suddenly left to the mercy of her harsh and vindictive Aunt Fortune, was an appealing little personage, and the episode where Aunt Fortune stains all her pretty white stockings with walnut juice to save frequent washing is one of those childhood tragedies that haunt the memory.

Few popular authors of books for girls, large and small, have stood the test of time. One wonders who now reads the "Lucy Books," the "Bessie Books" and their contemporaries of forty years ago. The interminable Elsie Dinsmore Series, keeping pace with the younger generations through Elsie's own children and grandchildren, secured a lease of life far beyond her deserts. For at best the "Elsie Books" showed a distorted view of life, a questionable and injudicious morality. The one lasting impression of the whole series is that left by the episode of Elsie sitting interminably upon the piano stool, until she faints from weariness and hunger, all because her father insists that she shall sit there until she plays him a certain secular piece on Sunday. The Elsie Books may have endured by force of numbers, but they are not in the Best Book class.

"Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates," by Mary Mapes Dodge, and "Little Lord Fauntleroy," by Frances Hodgson Burnett, undoubtedly belong. Without being big stories or strikingly original, they are eminently wholesome; and after frequent readings they wear well. Of course, if you have read "Hans Brinker" you will remember the great skating race, and how the silver skates were won; and best of all, how Hans's father, after sitting for years in an imbecile stupor after a blow on the head, is operated upon, recovers his wits, and tells how, years ago, he buried a fortune beside the tree in the yard. And when they dig beside the tree they find nothing, because, as they presently remember, it was not that new young tree the father meant, but the old tree, gone years ago—beneath whose stump the treasure is found. And as for Lord Fauntleroy, there are a score of memories, from the first glimpse we have of a pair of sturdy legs flashing past when Cedric wins the impromptu foot race, down through his departure for England, leaving his friend the grocer to point out mournfully "His Lordship's wery kicks," on the apple barrel; and reaching the climax where the fierce old Earl is finally reconciled to his daughter-in-law and tells her, "We always wanted you here, only we were not precisely aware of it." "Little Lord Fauntleroy" may be over-sentimentalized in spots, but the pleasure it gives is of sterling quality.

III.

It is an interesting experiment to ask your various acquaintances among writers, teachers and others supposed to have expert knowledge, what their personal choice would be of a dozen unquestionably "best books" for children. Widely as their answers may vary, "Little Women," "Treasure Island" and "Alice in Wonderland" will prove fairly constant quantities. And then presently they will add reluctantly, "I suppose 'Mother Goose' really ought to be included." Why "Mother Goose" should be admitted with apology or as an afterthought is hard to understand. It is one of our proudest and most distinctive possessions on the children's bookshelves, part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage, redolent of old English customs and traditions and English cheer. No other nation or language possesses any similar collection of nursery rhymes and jingles, so universally familiar, so interwoven into the fabric of our speech and thought. Humpty-Dumpty, Simple Simon, Old King Cole are one and all part of the verbal coinage of the realm of letters, symbols as definite and enduring as Hamlet or Mr. Micawber. And no matter how many times you have told your children or grandchildren about "Jack and Jill," or "The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe," it never once occurred to you that the words were silly. And that perhaps is more than one can say to-day of a similar experiment with, let us say, Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress."

Out of half a dozen persons whom the present writer recently consulted only one made mention of "Aesop's Fables," but that one stressed it as the book which stood out above all others among the sharp

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